Chronicle of a Death Foretold
Plot Summary

About the Book
A mysterious and haunting tale of romance and murder, that begins with the marriage of a man and a woman in love. But when he inexplicably mistreats his beloved on the night of the wedding, he is in turn murdered by her brothers, and we are left with a strange sense of inevitability and passions gone terribly awry.

Plot Summary
The central action which shapes and informs every page of **Chronicle of a Death Foretold** is the murder of the twenty-one-year-old aristocrat, Santiago Nasar, by the Vicario brothers in a "legitimate defense" of their sister's honor. The novel consists of a detailed history of the circumstances of the murder taken by the narrator, a journalist and former friend of the victim, twenty-seven years after the incident in question. The long range effects of this murder on the citizens of the small unnamed Latin American town in which it occurs, and their tacit complicity in the crime itself, are revealed in the course of the narrator's history. In the end, the question of whether Santiago Nasar actually deserved his fate remains unanswered. Why he was killed, how his death could have been prevented, the moment-by-moment events leading up to the crime, and the final brutal act are meticulously set down but, finally, the narrator is unable to come to any conclusions despite all the evidence he has amassed.

When Angela Vicario's husband discovers his bride's lost virtue the night of their wedding, he returns her to the house of her mother, as is his right. She is "damaged goods," a disgrace to her family's name, and so her mother beats her for hours. When questioned, Angela Vicario names Santiago Nasar as "my perpetrator." Her twin brothers, pig butchers by trade, pick up their tools and set out to revenge their sister's lost honor in the accepted manner. Drunk from the wedding festivities, and announcing their intentions all over town, the sleepless pair at last meet up with Nasar in the early morning hours. In attempting to explain Nasar's apparent ignorance of what is about to occur, the villagers speculate that he is either innocent of the deed, too haughty to expect punishment for it, or simply resigned to his fate. In any case, Nasar seems unable to protect himself from attack. With the local bishop's boat passing by in the background, against an ominous chorus of crowing cocks and barking dogs, in the blinding white light of day, the murderers move in on their victim.

Learning at last of the Vicario brothers' intent, Nasar shows only confusion. "He turned pale and lost control in such a way that it was impossible to think he was pretending." On the streets of the square the villagers gather "the way they did on parade days." The previous night they had gathered for a wedding party, a riotous extravaganza, such as nothing that had been seen there before. Now they gather to greet the bishop, and perhaps, to witness the murder. Everyone who sees Nasar walking to the dock knows that he understands he is about to be killed. He appears so confused that he cannot find his way home. When the attack begins there are many witnesses, none of whom try to stop it. Nasar's cries resound as the Vicario brothers keep on knifing him "with alternate and easy stabs" oblivious to "the shouts of the whole town, frightened by its own crime." After the final stabs, Nasar rises out of the bloody dust to walk "more than a hundred yards entering the house of his mother with his usual good bearing, measuring his steps well...his Saracen face with its dashing ringlets...handsomer than ever." Dusting off his own entrails which he carries in his hands, he announces to his mother, "'They've killed me, Wene child,'" and falls on his face in the kitchen.

"There had never been a death more foretold," the narrator asserts, repeating the truth that haunts the entire town. Dismissing their superficial reactions--"most of the townspeople consoled themselves with the pretext that affairs of honor are sacred monopolies"--he finds the murder has in fact created "a single anxiety which had made of the town an open wound."

In retracing the actions of the victim and his assailants, the narrator finds innumerable moments in which the right word or the right action could have prevented the murder from occurring. Nasar's cook, Victoria Guzmán, and her teenage daughter admit years afterward that they both knew the time, place, and motive of the killing. "They had been told it by a woman who had passed by...to beg a bit of milk." Yet that morning, one serves him coffee and the other escorts him to the door and opens, saying nothing. Clotilde Armenta, the proprietress of the milk shop where the Vicario brothers spend their last hours before the crime in drunken sleep, watches Nasar walk down the street to the dock where the town is gathering to greet the bishop. "'For the love of God,'" she murmurs, "'Leave him for later, if only out of respect for his grace the bishop.'"

Others assume that if the danger were real, Nasar must know of it. Don Lazar Aponte, a retired army colonel, and the local priest who see him on the dock "safe and sound" conclude that the threat "had all been a fib." In fact, since so many know what is going on, no one who sees Nasar considers that he hasn't been warned of Angela Vicario's charge, and of her brothers' desire for revenge. "It seemed impossible to all that he hadn't."

At the meat market where the brothers go to sharpen their butchering knives twenty-two people admit having heard them say, "'We're going to kill Santiago Nasar,'" but pay no attention. "'We thought it was drunkards' baloney," the witnesses declare. When a policeman hears of their plan, he informs Colonel Aponte, who takes away the Vicario brothers' knives, reminds himself to warn Nasar, and then forgets to do so. By the time the bishop's boat passes there were few left in the town who did not know "that the Vicario twins were waiting for Santiago Nasar to kill him, and in addition, the reasons were understood down to the smallest detail."

Chance also contributes to the outcome of events. A warning note slipped under Nasar's door is not discovered until after he is killed. Christo Bedoya, Nasar's close friend, goes to Nasar's home, finds the Vicario brothers waiting there, takes a gun, but does not know how to use it, and sets out to intercept his friend whom he cannot find. At last, Nasar walks unarmed into his courtyard, sees the Vicario brothers, pounds desperately on the door his own mother has bolted against the killers, believing that her son is already inside.

In a society of rigid hierarchies and strict codes of behavior such as the one Garciía Márquez examines in this novel, deeper motivations can be seen to have been at work in influencing the actions of the townspeople. Economic and social inequities make Santiago Nasar a target of hatred even as he is an object of admiration. "Handsome, a man of his word, and with a fortune at twenty-one," Nasar moves freely through the town in a privileged existence, afforded by money and maleness. When the butcher, Faustino Santos, perceives "a glimmer of truth in Pablo Vicario's threat," he asks, "'Why they had to kill Santiago Nasar since there were so many other rich people who deserved dying first.'"

In this culture, the question of honor is deeply tied to the position of women who are divided into categories of saint and whore according to economic class. We see Nasar's formal politeness with his fiancée who lives closely guarded under her father's roof; and we see Nasar's crude physicality with the daughter of his cook. The reader learns how much Victoria Guzmán hates her employer just as she hated his father before him. Having been sexually abused by the father, she watches Nasar begin to take advantage of her daughter in the same way his father had taken advantage of her. Thus, the daughter, Divina Flor, confesses to the narrator after her mother dies, "'In the depths of her heart she wanted to kill him.'" It was the real reason she hadn't said anything to warn Santiago Nasar on the morning of his murder.

If poor women are available for use in this society, the novel shows how the women of the higher classes are preserved for marriage and suffering and piety. In the Vicario family, the mother, a former schoolteacher, is known for her devotion, her meekness, and the spirit of sacrifice with which she cared for her husband and children. "At times one forgot she existed." The daughters she raises are "perfect...any man will be happy with them because they've been raised to suffer." They are taught embroidery, machine sewing, lace weaving, and "unlike other girls of the time, who had neglected the cult of death...[the Vicario girls] are past mistresses in the ancient science of sitting up with the ill, comforting the dying, and enshrouding the dead." As for marriage, they must do so out of obligation, not out of love. So when Angela Vicario is told by her parents that she must marry Bayardo San Román, a wealthy, somewhat mysterious stranger who knows from the instant he sees her that she is the woman he must have, she has no choice but to consent, particularly since her family is of modest means and "she has no right to disdain that prize of destiny."

Even after the engagement she is not permitted to go out alone with her intended. Closely guarded at every moment, her parents accompany her to ensure her honor. But, in truth, there is no honor left to guard, and Angela Vicario prays for the "courage to kill myself." When she confesses to her confidantes, they tell her they are experts in "men's tricks," and convince her that most husbands "resign themselves to anything as long as nobody knew about it." They teach her the old wives' tricks which will enable her to "display open under the sun in the courtyard of her house the linen sheet with the stain of honor."

An underworld of trickery and hypocrisy is exposed in the female sphere, one that makes a mockery of the whole notion of honor on which the murder of Santiago Nasar is based. The raw physicality that permeates the life of the town and which surfaces in the raw and powerful language of the book points up

the frailty of the concept of honor as it pertains to the protection of these village women who, when not contemptuous of it, are shown to be less protected than they are imprisoned by its punishing constraints.

And although there is no evidence to support Angela Vicario's accusation that Santiago Nasar is the "perpetrator," only her word unsupported by any hint of affection or even attention having passed between them, her brothers go about exacting revenge. Twenty years later, the narrator reports, no one really believes it was Nasar who was the real cause of the damage. Even the examining magistrate can find not one probably clue to support the bride's contention. Still, the Vicario twins' court plea of homicide in legitimate defense of honor is upheld, and while the family leaves the town in disgrace and they themselves serve a three year sentence for the crime, Angela Vicario never wavers in her original accusation.

The inevitability of Nasar's murder becomes the most overwhelming aspect of the narrator's investigation. Too many forces, some explicable, some inexplicable, seem to be at work in the same direction. The cult of machismo, seen in the riotous drinking, the prevalence of weapons, the casual boasting which, in this instance proves to be more than mere words, even the repressed anger of women who are victimized by the culture in which they live, all combine to ensure the murder of the young Nasar. If there is a sense of loss in the death of the privileged young man with "the lady killer face" and the "brilliant future," is one that exists alongside the less appealing aspects of Nasar's character which reveal him callously partaking of the hereditary liberties of his sex and his class.

It is an entire society which the narrator's investigation ultimately reveals, one in which religion and law appear ineffectual in providing a moral framework to guide and protect its citizens. The bishop, whose boat is passing by the dock bringing the townspeople out to be blessed, makes crosses in the air, continuously, mechanically, "without malice or inspiration," as crates of roosters crow ominously in the background. But the bishop's boat does not stop, and the people are left disappointed with his obligatory blessing.

After Nasar is killed, the mayor orders an autopsy which the village priest must perform since the local doctor is out of town and he had once studied medicine. "It was a massacre," the narrator reports, and begins to catalogue the wounds made by the Vicario brothers alongside the further damage done by the autopsy, a "second assault." Nasar's face becomes unrecognizable, his body, an empty shell which the priest stuffs with rags and quicklime. The stench is overpowering; it engulfs the town.

In contrast to the brutality of real life--the hacked body of Nasar; the sweating crowds; the raw descriptions of physical ailments which plague the Vicario twins; the depiction of animal butchery; the odors and cries of animals and humans--there is an otherworldly surreal quality which characterizes Nasar before his murder. Clothed in white, seen by various characters as "already dead," shining like aluminum, having the green color of dreams, Nasar appears as a vision in his last hours. Even the Vicario brothers partake of this surreal quality as they move in on Nasar. With their incongruous heavy black suits they bear themselves through the town almost mechanically under a two-day drunken stupor like "insomniac sleepwalkers." To some they are simply will-less agents of fate carrying out the role that has been assigned them.

In a chronicle abounding with ironies from the initial misinterpretation Nasar's mother makes of her son's dream at the beginning of the novel, to the bizarre vision of Nasar seen by Divina Flor at the end, the narrator finds the ultimate irony in the eventual reconciliation of Angela Vicario and her husband, Bayardo San Román. Exiled with her family in a faraway Indian village, Angela Vicario is middle-aged, her yellow hair grey. Her life passes in a kind of half-mourning--a rejected wife who spends the hours at her embroidery. Still, that is only the appearance of Angela Vicario's life. When the narrator interviews her twenty years after the murder, he finds in her a woman so mature and witty that he cannot believe she is the same person. She has come to understand her own life, as well as the life of her mother, "a poor woman devoted to the cult of her defects." Although she addresses "letters with no future" to her lost husband, year after year she receives no reply. One day, after twenty-seven years, San Román appears at her door, a fat man who is losing his hair. Lest the reader think that the outpourings of love these letters contain have at last succeeded in reconciling the estranged couple, García Márquez makes sure to report that the two thousand letters Román has brought with him have never been opened.

As simply and inevitably as the story of Nasar's death unfolds, and as plainly and powerfully as it is told, **Chronicle of a Death Foretold** is not a novel which gives rise to simple explanations of human behavior. It comes face to face with an action which has far reaching effects on an entire community and shows how the complexity of the forces that not only bring about the murder of Santiago Nasar, but that

influence the behavior of all those who are involved in the tenuous network of the society in which it occurs. If there is brutal, sometimes shocking language used to relate this history, there is no question that the language is sparsely and aptly employed and that its intent is to mirror the shock of the speaker. In contrast, there is in the luminous language a veritable canvas of light and dark, of red and white and gold and black. It is a novel to be studied for the depiction of character, for the beauty and skill of its language, for its power and complexity, and above all, for its relentless searching after the meaning of experience.